

Putting Love in Perspective

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Preacher: Chris Thornton

- [0 : 00] Good morning. I don't feel like I really need to say anything now after Yidi and Julie.
- I think they've just spoken the sermon for me, so I think I'll go and sit down. But I prepared something, so maybe... Let me just pray, actually. Let me just pray.
- Father, thank you that you're a God of love. Thank you that you know us. Thank you that you know where we're up to. Thank you that you know our hearts.
- And I pray you'd speak to us this morning. Challenge us with this, what I find, a very painful and difficult passage, even though it's an amazing passage. And just help us to see how beautiful you are.
- In your name. Amen. I wonder if there was one thing that you would want to be known for in your life, what would it be?
- [1 : 06] If it comes to your funeral and people are talking about you, I wonder what you would want to be known for. When you get back on your deathbed and you say, I lived life well without regrets.
- What kind of life would you have lived? Because perspective is an amazing thing. You know, if you could see what was truly valuable in the future, you would make some incredibly different decisions today.
- Just think about it. If you knew that horse Clippity Clop was a thousand to one, but was going to win, you would place all your money on Clippity Clop.
- Would you not? If you knew that shares in Watermark were going to go through the roof, and there are no shares in Watermark, I'm afraid, but then you'd bank all your money on it.
- Because perspective changes the way you live today. I don't know if you've seen, there's a Mr. Bean episode where, it's very profound.
- [2 : 22] Mr. Bean sits an exam, and he, I don't know if you've seen it, but he goes in, he goes down, sits down, opens the exam paper, and he starts kind of, he's a bit confused at the beginning, and then after a while, he starts kind of furiously writing the exam, gets to the end of the exam, puts it down, relieved, thinking, okay, I've done it.
- And then the examiner says something like, so those of you who are meant to do the green paper, and he looks down, and he's done the pink paper, and suddenly he realized, he did completely the wrong exam.
- Can you imagine what that feeling is like? If you get to the end of the day, and you realize, you did the wrong exam. And we've been looking in 1 Corinthians, at this passage, where Paul is basically talking to this church, and he's trying to give them perspective, that if he doesn't want the Corinthians to get to the end of their lives, and to say like, one of the students, a 70 year old student that I once taught said, I've wasted my life.
- I've wasted it. He doesn't want them to go there. Because Paul is trying to tell us, listen, the paper that you should be taking in your life, is love. Because love lasts.
- At the end of the day, love counts. And this church in Corinth, well, they thought they had made it. You see, they were a highly talented, gifted church.

[4 : 04] Right at the beginning of the book, in chapter 1, Paul says, you've been blessed with every spiritual gift. And you know, they had the greatest preachers, they had the greatest children's workers, they had the greatest tongues, they had all these miracle workers, they had the hottest band, and it was the greatest, hottest, most exciting church out there.

They thought they'd arrived. They thought they'd made it. They thought they were mature. And Paul comes along, and in chapter 3, he tells them, do you know what guys?

You're just spiritual infants. You're babies. And he says, your spirituality is self-focused, and self-focused spirituality is childish.

You need to grow up. Now, I wince a little bit at that, because he's saying, you need to stop sucking your spiritual thumb, and learn what maturity really means in the Christian life.

And maturity means having an outward focus, and an outward perspective of love. So we're going to look through this passage, have it with you in front of you.

[5 : 17] I'm going to kind of move around a little bit, but Tobin started looking at this, and we're just going to look one more time through this passage. There is so much in here. And we looked last time, verses 1 to 3 of this passage are very much about how the necessity of love.

You know, you can have all the tongues, all the gifts, everything you like, but without love, they're just noise. Verse 4 to 7 is about the character of love. It's like, what does love look like?

And we'll come back to that and look briefly at that at the end. And verse 8 to 13 are about the permanence of love, love that lasts. And we're going to look particularly at those last verses.

And I pray that God would give us that sense of perspective on our lives, right where we're up to at the moment. So we're going to look at love realizes, first of all, love realizes what the time is.

Love realizes what the time is. Verses 9 to 12. Paul, he describes a number of things.

[6 : 22] He says, we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully even as I have been fully known.

What he's saying is this, there are two kind of periods in life. There is now and there is then. It's not complicated. Okay? Now and then. And he uses three images to describe these two periods of life.

He uses the image of something which is partial and incomplete with something which is complete and perfect. He uses the imagery of childhood and adulthood. He uses then the imagery of looking into a mirror and seeing a reflection as opposed to seeing a person in person, in the flesh.

And so he says, you've got to get this idea. What is now? Because the Corinthians thought then was now. They thought heaven was now. But now is the time when you actually don't get the full picture, even of God.

[7 : 34] Life is frustrating. Life is under the curse of sin. It's a broken world. It's a world where there's sin abounds, there's injustice, there's suffering, and you know it when you go out into the world, when you watch the news, you can see now is filled with pain.

There's great things, but there's also hardship. And sometimes God doesn't always seem so clear either. I don't understand why God sometimes does the things he does.

Like really, I don't. I don't understand why did he let my brother die? I don't understand why did he let my parents suffer for health issues for most of their lives when other people seem to have just a cushy life?

I don't understand. And I don't know about you, but there are times when we feel lost. We just don't know the direction we should be going in.

We don't know, as parents, how do I deal with my kids? We don't know my studies. Where am I going? We live in a sense of lostness sometimes, even in our relationship with God.

[8 : 39] We sometimes, God, where are you? Now, maybe that's just me. But Paul is saying there is something about now which is partial, which is incomplete.

God is here. We can know him, but it's not complete. And he goes on to say that our human experience is not just partial, but it's also like this childhood image.

You know, Corinthians were so fixated on gifts, but Paul says to them, now is like a child. You know, when I was a kid, I would cry if I didn't have my little comfort blanket.

And I used to have to carry around this little comfort blanket. Child by child, I mean like three. I don't mean like 12. Okay? And I couldn't go anywhere without it.

But now, imagine me as an adult. If I stand up here and I have to have my little comfort blanket with me, otherwise I feel insecure, you would probably start calling a doctor or psychologist or something.

[9 : 51] Right? Because for a child, a comfort blanket is perfectly good. But for an adult, you don't need it. What Paul is saying is the gifts that the Corinthians had thought were just the be-all and end-all, he's saying, if you get some perspective, you see it's just like what a child needs at the moment.

They're good for this stage. But at the end of the day, that's not what it's all about. He's saying to Corinthians, stop thinking so childishly about so fixated with these gifts.

Paul then goes on with his third image, the image of a mirror. And he's saying, now is when you look in a mirror and all you see is a reflection.

That's what he means by dimly. It's indirect. You don't see the full picture. It's a bit like me Skyping my parents. You know, I see them.

I see something. It's good. But actually, it's so different from when I go and I meet them in the flesh. You can actually touch them. You can feel them.

[11 : 04] There's such a different vibe. And it's a bit like now God is kind of online in a little way.

We see him. We feel him. We experience him. That's now. But then, when Christ returns and restores creation, I won't just be looking at a kind of screen.

I'll be bathing in the warmth of his presence next to me. Now, though I can know God, it's incomplete.

Then, we'll be like an intimate old couple who nod and smile when something happens because they know exactly what each other's thinking. Because they've been with each other.

They know each other. That's what it'll be like with God. We'll know his heart like he knows my heart right now. He knows what I'm thinking. He knows my fears.

[12 : 05] He knows my thoughts. He knows why you put your Facebook profile picture on there. He knows everything. And we will know him with that intimacy.

And Paul is saying, that's the goal of the Christian life. That's where it's going. It's about him. Not about yourself.

So that's now and that's then. But what happens if you don't realize the time? I mean, if you don't realize the time, I mean, what's the time now? Sorry?

Sorry? Great. It's time to end, according to John. You see, we think of time in just minutes and hours.

But God thinks in terms of seasons. So think about it. If you don't realize that this season is the now, if you don't realize that spiritual gifts are given to you for this season because God wants to show his love through you in the fog of here, he wants to show his light, cracks of light in the midst of the fog.

[13 : 24] Think about it. In the now, we don't see everything clearly. Why do we need a gift of healing? Have you thought about it? Because there's sickness.

And God, at specific times, wants to show a glimpse of his love to you by providing people with gifts of healing. Then, in heaven, do you need healing?

There's no sickness. Why do you need the gift of encouragement? Because life can be so discouraging. You know, some of you are so discouraged by work, discouraged by your grades, discouraged by other people, discouraged by your kids.

And we look at everybody else around us and compare us. And God provides people in his church, in his body, to come alongside you, to encourage you, to lift your eyes up in the midst of the fog so that you begin to see him through it all.

He wants to give you hope in now. That's what gifts are for. We could go through all of them, but we don't have time. because he wants other people to experience God's love through you.

[14 : 38] Spiritual gifts are simply tools to enable you to love in the now of life. Okay? If you don't use your gifts, this body will not experience the love of God as God intended it.

Did you get that? If you don't use your gifts, this body will not experience the love of God the way he has designed it for now. Do you know, the word in Greek for spiritual gift comes from the word grace.

And that's what gifts are. Gifts are simply gifts. It means you give them gifts of grace. So I give a gift of grace to you and through it you experience God's grace coming to you as you're encouraged, as you're healed, as you speak a word which just brings light to your darkness.

It's like my mom when we were kids, she used to buy us presents because we weren't kind of old enough so that we could give my dad on his birthday.

Right? I don't know if some of you had that as well. Maybe you do that with your kids. Okay? You know, it's like surprise. But what would happen, so my mom wants my dad to experience love and so she gives a gift to the child and wants the child to give it to my dad.

[16 : 08] But what happens if I say, I'm not going to give it. I'm going to keep it for myself. My dad would not experience the love that my mom wanted him to experience through his children.

That's why spiritual gifts are meant to work. If you don't give your gifts to other people, you will not help them to see the love of God that he wants them to know in now.

So my challenge is, do we do that? Do we do the same to our church family here? Do we do that? Because Paul's point is, if these spiritual gifts are meant to be cracks of light in the midst of the fog, when the sun rises and Christ comes back, then you don't need light again because you've already got the greatest light.

Because when then comes, I won't need anybody to point me to Christ because I'll see him face to face. I will know him perfectly.

Love realizes the time that means you cannot walk alone as a Christian because if you're not involved in relationships, you are going to be withholding love that God wants to give to others and also you will not receive the love that God wants you to receive from others.

[17 : 43] So love knows the time. Secondly, love is about character and the greatest of these is love.

Okay? What makes it through to the final round? What makes it all the way it's love. Okay? What counts isn't the great gifts that you have.

You know, there are many fabulous Christian speakers and writers who end up causing damage in the church because they were so gifted but they didn't have the character to go along with their gifts.

People thought they were mature because they could give a good sermon. Listen, I'm not mature because I'm speaking to you in front of you. That is not what counts because the Bible says just having knowledge of the Bible doesn't make you mature.

You can be nothing. That's what Paul says in the first three verses unless you have love. Ayah. That's So am I using my gifts to love or to exalt myself?

[18 : 53] But he says now there are three things which count. Faith counts. This is something that counts in Christian maturity. Love counts. Hope counts. This is what counts in God's eyes.

Colossians 1 verse 3 says this. We always thank God for you since we've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up in heaven.

Paul's explaining what he means. He's saying faith growing up as a Christian means you stop trusting in yourself and you start trusting in God. You start trusting yourself to sort out your world to sort out your kids to sort out your issues and you say God I need you.

I need you. I trust you with my world. That's what counts. It also means in the now hope counts.

It means fixing our eyes on the then of seeing God face to face and we invest in that relationship with God. In Hong Kong I think we have our now and then.

[19 : 58] You know now is study work suffering pain. Then is my holiday. Then is retirement. Okay this is where we put our hopes in but he says if you put your hope in those things do you know what it's not going to last you're not going to be mature you're going to be childish.

Can't you hope for something greater to know the living God face to face that is so much better than a holiday in Thailand. Holiday in Thailand is not bad but you know it's better.

Could I sacrifice the holiday in Thailand because I know that I have a bigger holiday with the King of Kings. Where's my hope? The third thing which counts as maturity is love and love is the greatest.

Why is love the greatest? Well think about it. Faith. Now we walk by faith but when we see Christ we'll see him.

We'll see him. We don't need that same sense of faith. When we see Christ our hope will be fulfilled but love doesn't stop when we see Christ.

[21 : 20] You see that word love never ends. It means love is not a flower that wilts. Love is not an iPhone battery that runs out. Love is not an employee who is replaced.

Love is better than Duracell. Love doesn't have a shelf life. Love never ends. And he's not talking about just any love.

You know in culture we have all you need is love. And Forrest Gump says I may not be a smart man but I know what love is. you know but that's not the kind of love he's talking about here.

He's talking about an earthy love for the people of God the love for the saints. At a previous church I was leading a group where there was a lady who was suffering from a severe depression at the time.

And one day I remember deciding for some reason that I would make a shepherd's pie. That's the easiest dish I don't know if you know what it is but it's like the idiot's guide to cooking.

[22 : 25] And do you know and I was a little nervous because cooking is not my greatest strength and I didn't want to poison her that's not love. Okay. And but I went I cooked it gave it to her forgot all about it carried on you know when I was teaching I was leading in the group three four years later she gets married she invites me to the wedding and her parents I see her parents I go up to introduce myself to them and they said oh we know you that's a scary one it's like okay what did I do wrong you know they said you're the shepherd pie guy and I'm like I don't normally get addressed like that and so because I'd forgotten about it and then they reminded me of that day and the strange thing was that I had been teaching and leading and doing all these things all the time thinking these were the great things but it was that one tiny action that actually touched her life and had stayed in her memory all that time because she experienced

God's love through my total inadequacy and I'm not saying that story just show how wonderfully loving I am because actually this shows me so often how lacking in love and I really realize that even as I look at that passage and Tobin challenges you I look at it and I say wow I fall so far short because I'm so wrapped up in the issues of now I'm so wrapped up with all the tasks I've got to do all the problems I've got to solve all the projects that I have in my mind that I think that if I can just get those done then later I'll have time to love people the problem is that's just kidding myself if you don't love people now listen you're not going to be loving people 20 years later and the challenging thing that Paul would say is if I do that I'm actually wasting my life on something that doesn't last now is the time to love

Dr. Hannah who some of you know who was here earlier he once said something that really struck in my mind he said I could have been promoted in my field far more quickly than I did everyone else around me was progressing at a stage in my life I had a clear decision whether I prioritized my family or my career I thought about it long and hard and I realized if I chose career I could lose my family and grow old lonely but if I chose my family then I'll always have my family to look after me in old age he chose love because love lasts that doesn't mean you can't be involved in work doesn't mean but actually it's the attitude with which I do it which is what counts and I think the same is true in church the people who've had the biggest influence on me in my life have not been the really gifted people they've just been the people who have loved me because love lasts love knows the time love is about character which lasts third thing love is uncomfortable have you ever thought what a ridiculous idea church is have you ever thought about that

I mean it's completely nuts I mean think about it you get a bunch of self-centered people who have come from perhaps previously no relationship before okay from different backgrounds different nationalities different personalities and then you put them all in the same group and you tell them to love each other it's insane I mean who would have thought up that idea I mean you've got the entrepreneur who just can't sit still charges in feet first into everything then you've got the laid back Aussie guy you know he just sits still and you can't get them to move then you've got you've got the kind of techie geek in the corner you know who's as socially adept as like a rhino doing ballet you know that kind of thing and then you've got the chatterbox who just won't stop talking and then you've got the sensitive guy who just won't say boo to a goose and then you've got the emotional ones and then you've got the ones you haven't seen in emotion for years and you put them all together and what do you get?

Church now whose idea was that? I mean it's a recipe for disaster and it gets worse because the people that you're supposed to be with are actually sinful they get impatient they say things they shouldn't they're annoying maybe I shouldn't say that but and I mean I used to just a silly example I used to be in a community group back in the UK and it was filled with introverts but it wasn't just ordinary introverts they were socially awkward introverts all of them now I'm an extrovert generally and so people like we'd sit around in the group and no one would speak and I would invite a friend to come into this group and no one would speak to them and it would drive me nuts and the thing was I would I would be telling people church is all about loving people you know we're just a community of love and they'd come in and they'd get as warm a welcome as a block of ice will give you

[28 : 08] I mean it was just terrible and what's my natural reaction my natural reaction is get me out of there because I want to find some people that I actually like being with and the thing is what Paul is saying in this passage is really quite challenging because he says my natural reaction which just wants to get out of there is not love because love is patient love is kind love is not irritable or resentful love does not rejoice at wrongdoing that means that love doesn't count up wrongs love bears all things believes all things hopes all things endures all things and when you start putting it into reality you suddenly go ah because at first sight it sounds like a beautiful kind of Bruno Mars and Paul kind of together kind of song you know love bears all things patient but but but when you come to the reality of it it is so hard it is the hardest it is the hardest thing you will ever do in your life any of you who have got kids know this but it is also the most rewarding thing you will ever do in your life because you know that group of people

I actually did stick with them I had to I was the leader of the group so I mean but you know six months later you know God did something because God worked in that community and they became the most loving welcoming community that I have ever been in in my entire life and if I had bailed out at that moment when I really wanted to then I would never have experienced it that's God because love is forged in the pain of friction and difficulty love is made in the gritty ups and downs of being with the people who are flawed is when you go through the fight and you come through the other side you know relationships friendships which never have conflict you know they're superficial right until you have conflict and you work through the conflict and you get through with forgiveness and love and a lot of crying then

God begins to work something now sometimes people don't respond as we want them to be but you see what God does through these things is he means to make you who he wants you to be he begins to mature you through these things and you grow up when love when the going gets tough love doesn't get going it sticks in there now I know I know that there are some people who've had a lot of pain and I'm not talking about abuses cases of abuses or serious sin where sometimes you actually have to get out of a relationship but I'm talking about everyday love in messy church with messy people love is patient think about it how do you learn patience it's with an irritating annoying people right you want to learn patience listen

God will teach you patience he'll put you in church listen love does not rejoice at wrong doings it doesn't count up wrongs like an accountant that's what it means because when do you count up wrongs when you have been wronged and hurt it's painful it's painful but in a world where wrong happens all the time love actually liberates you from the resentment and the things which actually hold you in a prison because all this stuff is going on in Corinth all this stuff is going on in Corinth and he says listen you will not grow muscles without lifting weight you will never give birth without feeling pain you will never grow mature in character to be somebody that people will look up to and at the end of your life they will say

I want to be like you if you haven't been through that friction that relationships and love causes you Dietrich Bonhoeffer a German pastor in the time of Hitler said this and this is profound he says those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest earnest and sacrificial those who dream of this idealized beautiful community demand that it be fulfilled by God by others and by themselves they enter the community of Christians with their demands set up their own law and judge one another and even God accordingly excuse me he goes on to say like Paul says because God has already brought us together as a body before we even joined the church he brought us together and we enter into this community not with demands but thankfully receiving what

[33 : 57] God has given us even the annoying person next to you we do not complain about what God doesn't give us rather we are thankful for what God does give us what he's saying and I just find this difficult because he's saying church is a bunch of sinners like you and me and if you're not a sinner then you shouldn't be here so please leave okay but love is not found waiting for you on a plate to kind of okay come and get your love you'll never love the church you'll never love the people in the church if you simply come thinking community should be a certain way and if your expectations aren't met then you withdraw because I know this personally this is one of the hardest things I think even being an international church here in Hong Kong people come and go you know we've many of us have been in churches from different backgrounds

I know I have and you come with expectations what you think church is and what church isn't and then you arrive and then you get disappointed by certain people and often what happens is we begin to withdraw from others because it's not the way we thought it should be and what Bonhoeffer is saying is do you love your dream of community or your past experience of community or do you love the real people that God has placed around you now because the problem with a dream is this A they're not real B they're over when you wake up can you thank God for the people he's given you around you can you invest and begin to devote yourselves to some people in relationships in this church even the annoying ones because that's the way you're going to grow into maturity now nearly done do you know what the biggest problem with everything I've just said is it's impossible it's impossible

I challenge you go out there and try to love people perfectly this week I challenge you to go and love the annoying person next week go on try and do it dare you okay because loving your own family is hard enough loving people in the church is like but the thing is here's what Paul is trying to do you know that's why that bookmark is so helpful because what it's trying to do is trying to show you your love is inadequate my love is inadequate and if you think trying a bit harder or feeling a bit guilty is going to get you there forget it because that's just all about yourself the place to start with love is to look here at the cross because you're going to look at Christ and you're to see actually he is the perfect embodiment of all that patience kindness goodness love towards us and I have failed to love him the way he calls me to love

I have failed to use his gifts the way he called me to use these gifts I have not loved the people around me the way he's called me to love them and yet on the cross he covered me he bore my sin he doesn't count up my wrongdoing he throws it into the depths of the sea he is patient with me even with my lack of love though he loved more than anybody else he was abandoned by his father so that I could become you could become his child and know him intimately and so God is not saying to you now okay try harder he's saying to you come to me and repent say God I can't forgive me I can't do it but then if you think you've earned it you're going to make it all about you but if you realize that

Christ earned it for you he will change you you know like Yiddy said as she saw the way Julie and Edmund loved her it changed her when you see the way God loves you it changes you if you see that he delights in you in spite of you in spite of all the stuff that you haven't done this week that then takes you out of yourself to begin looking at the people around you in your community group and start loving them you have on your sheet a list here here are some of the needs that we have in Watermark as a church family have a look through them because here is some of the ways that actually you and I can take some practical steps to actually think what does love look like now for us have a look at them and consider how can

[39 : 29] I take a step to love not a giant leap it's a step to love but we don't want you to serve because you feel guilty we want you to serve because that's how you'll be who God has made you to be that's how you'll live without regret that's how the community around us which is longing to see love will see this loving community and God's love through us maybe just have a let's just stop for a minute and I want you to just to ask yourself the question before God who am I loving in this community are there people that I'm withdrawing from in this community other people that I am running away from in this community are there resentments that I have in this community and just bring those before

God now because God has brought people into our lives so that we may become mature just want you to think about am I really investing my life in something that's lasting just come before God now just pray Father everyone everyone is in a different place some of us feel overwhelmed by now the issues that we have some of us feel guilty because we feel we don't measure up and we're we're just stuck some of us are hurting and we don't know how we could ever love again because people have hurt us but

Father I pray that you would show us your love for us first I pray that you would show us that you have brought us into this community for a reason and there are people you want to love through us I pray that we would see that we're not called to be doing what is just self focus but we're called to do what is going to last I pray that we would we would have lives that would be a community where people even though they may disagree with us even though they may reject us they still say it's hard to argue with the life well lived that you have lived help us to be that community which is gritty in our love let us not be people who just run to and fro to try and find just what we want but realize what we want is actually found as we trust you and take just the next little step thank you that you're good

Lord thank you for your grace you're amazing amen that Thank you.